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MILTON AVERY

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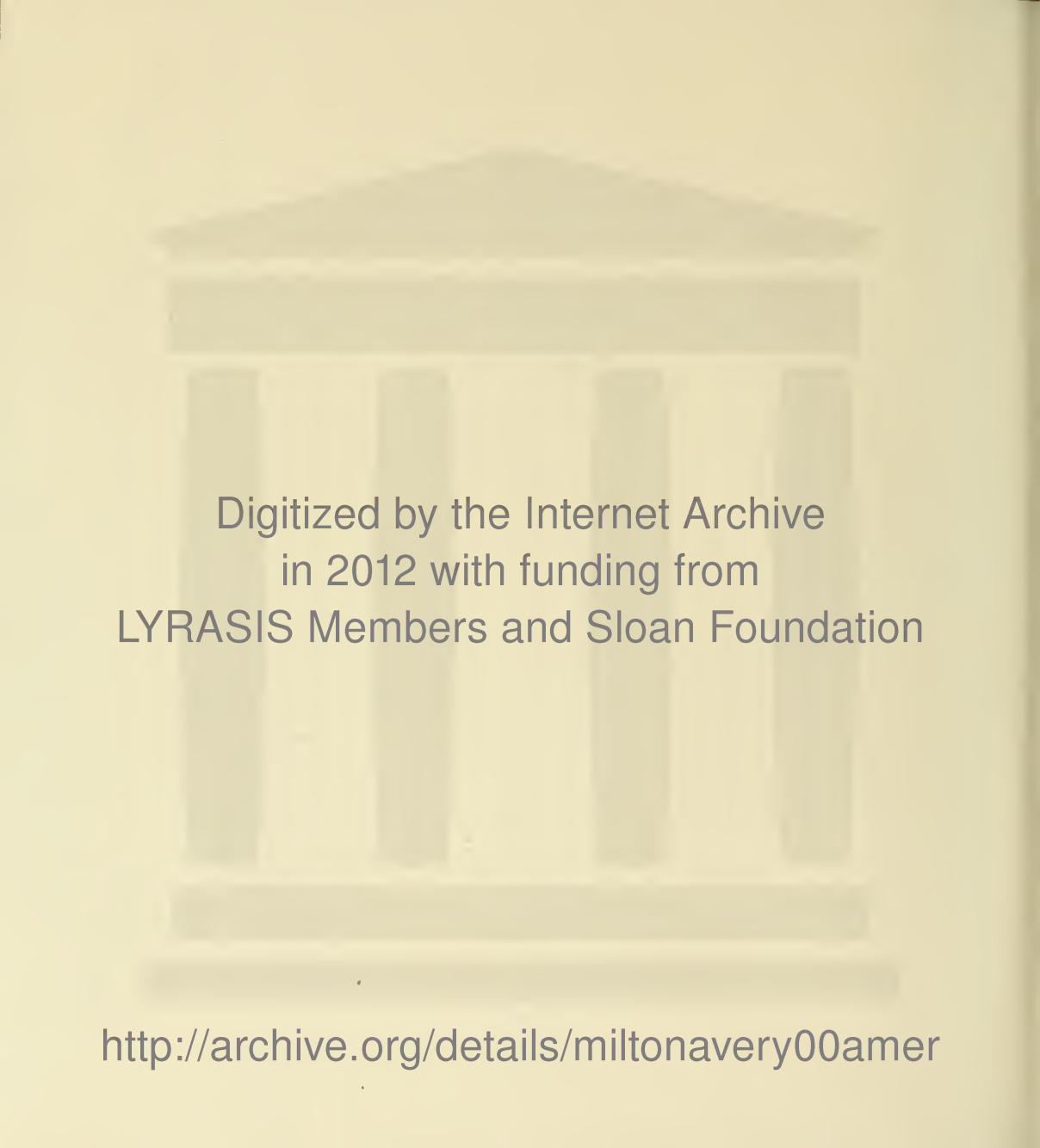
Milton Avery,



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A faint, light-colored watermark of a classical building with four columns and a triangular pediment is visible in the background.

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12 MOTHER AND CHILD, 1944

**MILTON AVERY**

*by Adelyn Breeskin, Director, Baltimore Museum of Art*

*The American Federation of Arts, New York*



v  
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*The retrospective exhibition of Milton Avery's work, as well as this monograph, are part of a series produced in 1959-1960 by The American Federation of Arts under a grant received from the Ford Foundation Program in the Humanities and the Arts. Other artists included are: Andrew Dasburg, José de Creeft, Lee Gatch, Mauricio Lasansky, Carl Morris, William Pachner, Walter Quirt, Abraham Rattner, Hugo Robus, Karl Schrag, and Everett Spruce.*

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**MILTON AVERY** Several years ago, reviewing a small New York exhibition, Clement Greenberg wrote of Milton Avery, "It is time he were given a full-scale retrospective by a New York museum, not for the sake of his reputation but for the sake of the situation of art in New York. The latest generation of abstract painters in New York has certain salutary lessons to learn from him that they cannot learn from any other artist on the scene."<sup>1</sup>

Here now is a retrospective which can be studied by artists not only in New York but also from coast to coast. Indeed, here is painting that has so much eloquence of feeling, so much exemplary solidity and integrity, that it should make a profound impression on artists and public alike, enhancing the position of Milton Avery as one of America's foremost painters.

<sup>1</sup> *Milton Avery*, by Clement Greenberg, *Arts*, December, 1957.

Poetry and mystery abound in his paintings and color achieves a life of its own, sometimes lovely and gentle, sometimes startlingly tart, yet always subtle and applied with the authority of well-rounded experience. For Avery is a veteran painter whose work has grown constantly, his most recent work being the most profound and vital of his entire career. It has the effortless ease which only a master achieves, and the intuitive compositional strength bred of full understanding. The distortion of his shapes is bold but accurate, and his simplifications always retain sufficient identity with his subject to be entirely readable.

There was a time when Avery was compared with Matisse. That both artists adhered to subject matter, throughout the years when the growth of the abstract movement was absorbing the attention of the majority of artists, may have helped

to bring about this comparison. Both artists also have used color as the most brilliant and basic mainspring of their work. Then, too, both have expressed happiness with their lot in life, painting their close environment with seeming satisfaction and contentment. Neither has delved into his subconscious to express dark moods and resentments.

There is also another analogy, which has to do with their technical means; both artists use paint frugally, applying it thinly and at times even leaving some bare canvas. We know that to Matisse this thin paint surface was so important that as his paintings evolved, rather than to try out colors on his canvas, he often preferred to pin on pieces of colored cardboard which were easily removed again, until his final composition was so set in his mind's eye that he could paint it

directly with little or no over-painting or scraping.

With Avery a similar result is obtained as the artist sits back in an armchair and studies both the canvas and the subject while eliminating, organizing and simplifying. A stroke here and a dot there is enough identification until the painting can take its final form. He uses sketches as reminders and paints in his studio from them. These sketches for the most part are enough to recall the full image to his mind. And this image retains the identity of his subject to a remarkable degree, no matter how much he distorts and simplifies it.

While there are similarities with Matisse in spirit and means, Avery never studied in France, and did not even visit there until the summer of 1952. He has always gone his own way, and it is a way with a sturdy New England quality.

Although he was born in 1893 in Altmar in Upper New York State near Oswego, he grew up in Hartford, Connecticut. Following high school, he first took a correspondence course in lettering and then studied briefly at the Connecticut League of Art Students. Early in his career he liked, as he does now, to "roam the countryside making sketches"<sup>2</sup> and he worked at a variety of night jobs in order to be able to go out to the surrounding meadows and paint in the daytime.

In 1925 he went to Gloucester to paint during the summer and while there he met Sally Michel, who had also come there to paint and whom he married the following spring. Since then, their life together in New York City has been one in which she has supported him with her faith and strength and protected him from many worldly worries. Her ability as an illustrator made it possible for him to

<sup>2</sup> Statement by the artist. *Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture*, 1955.  
University of Illinois.

continue his painting uninterruptedly throughout the past thirty-one years. He has never had to teach, but a group of younger painters, including Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb, often would join with him to draw from the model, and he has held their friendship and admiration through long years.

The other close and significant emotional tie in Milton Avery's life is his daughter, March. He has painted her often over the years, alone, and as a highly meaningful part of a family threesome. There are many explorations of family relationships in Avery's paintings, and so many pictures of March, growing up—from baby in a chair to young woman—that in 1947 the Durand-Ruel Galleries in New York staged a delightful exhibition called, simply, "My Daughter, March." Avery's eloquence in paint is in strong contrast to his own silence and

quietude, for he seldom talks and can sit for long periods of time just looking. He prefers "speaking" with paint and does so with deep feeling, yet with sufficient detachment to remain self-contained, never sentimental.

He also has a delightful Yankee sense of humor which frequently shows in his work—in his way of seeing things such as the long-leggedness of his growing daughter; the cockiness of some chickens; and the awkwardness of the skirted "Rider by the Loire."

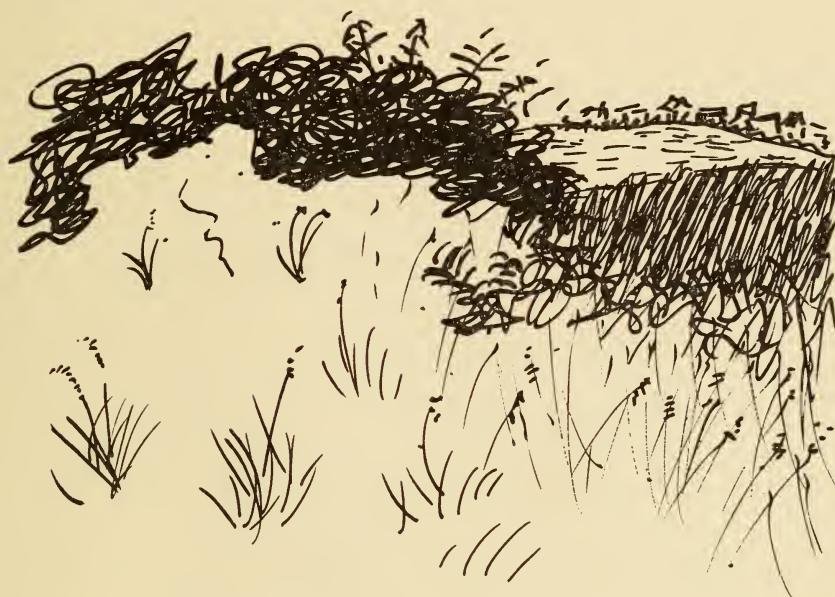
Way back in 1929 Lloyd Goodrich, reviewing the opening season for *The Arts*, saw, in a group show, one of the first Averys to be exhibited. He wrote, "A figure by Milton Avery, while rudimentary had an arresting quality, giving an impression of undeveloped potentialities."<sup>3</sup> Today it is stimulating and exhilarating for all of us,

<sup>3</sup> The Opening Season, by Lloyd Goodrich. *The Arts*, October, 1929.

as Clement Greenberg says, “to see a mature and accepted artist stepping out and expanding his art. He has now taken all that he knows, which is a very considerable amount since he is such a solidly entrenched veteran painter, and he has now infused a more expansive, vital and deeper spirit into it.”<sup>4</sup>

I think that this is increasingly true of Avery’s work of the past two or three years. He seems to have synthesized his viewpoint, at the same time enlarging his concepts and dramatizing them. Especially in his landscapes and seascapes there is a new vitality and strength. To me, canvases such as “Tangerine Moon and Wine Dark Sea” and “Sand, Sea and Sky” stand out as magnificent works by a mature artist at the height of his powers.

<sup>4</sup> Clement Greenberg. *op. cit.*

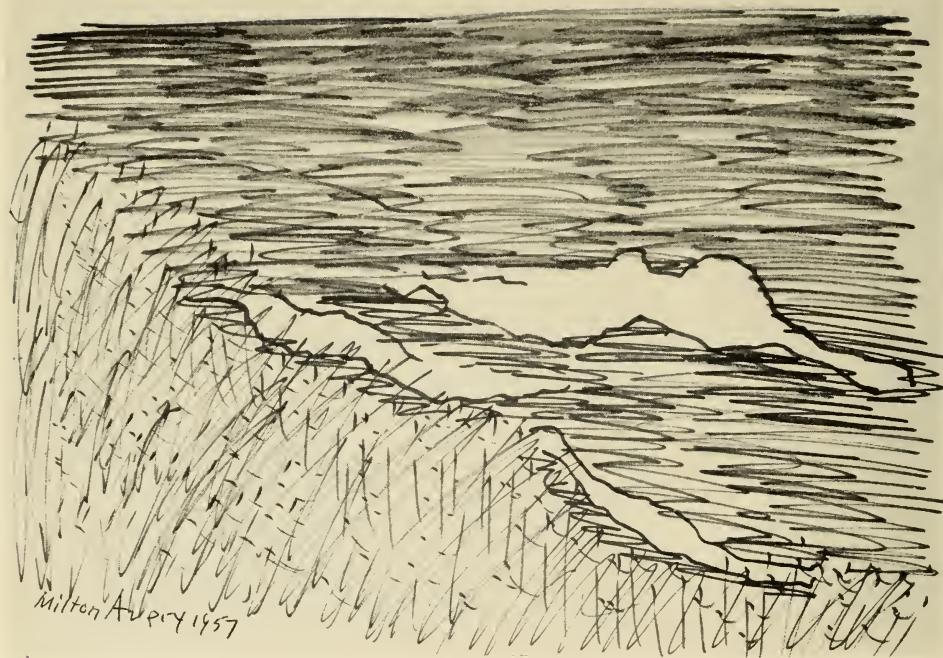


**AVERY** "It was my third summer in Provincetown. Weeks of wet weather had discouraged me. Then a day cleared, but the atmosphere was still oppressive. That evening I sat on my deck facing Provincetown bay. The water was moody—wine dark. Across the bay the lights of Wellfleet were a row of buttons on the horizon. Suddenly above the lights appeared a surprising moon, tangerine in color and shape. It made magic. A week later I painted "Tangerine Moon and Wine Dark Sea."

Milton Avery / October 23, 1959



35 TANGERINE MOON AND WINE DARK SEA, 1959



**CHRONOLOGY** 1893: Born March 7, Altmar, New York, (near Oswego), son of Russell and Esther Avery. 1905: Moved with his family to Hartford, Connecticut. After high school, he took a correspondence course in lettering and studied briefly at the Connecticut League of Art Students. 1913: Worked on an eight-hour night shift at the United States Tire and Rubber Company, painting in the Connecticut countryside during the day. 1925: Moved to New York City. 1926: Married Sally Michel, painter and illustrator, whom he had met the preceding summer in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Daughter March, born October 12, 1932. (Mrs. Philip Cavanaugh). 1928: First exhibited, Opportunity Gallery, N.Y.C. 1929: Awarded Logan Prize, Chicago Art Institute. 1930: Awarded Atheneum Prize, Connecticut Academy of Fine Arts. 1935: First one-man exhibition on 57th Street, Valentine Gallery, followed by a steady succession of one-man and group exhibitions. The Averys have always lived in New York in the winter and have traveled frequently: Vermont (1935-1936); the Gaspé Peninsula (1938); California (1941); Mexico (1946); Maine (1949); Florida (1950, 1951, 1959); Europe (1952); Provincetown (1957, 1958, 1959). 1943-1950: Work handled by Rosenberg & Co., and Durand-Ruel Gallery. 1949: First Prize, Baltimore Watercolor Club. 1951: Grace Borgenicht became his dealer; continues to handle his work at present. 1952: Visited Europe for the first time. 1958: Second Prize, Boston Arts Festival. 1959: Art: USA 1959. \$1,000 Award for *Sea and Dunes*.

**ONE-MAN EXHIBITIONS:** 1928: Opportunity Gallery, N.Y. 1932: Gallery, 144 West 13th Street, N.Y. 1935: Valentine Gallery, N.Y., also 1936, 1938. 1943: Phillips Gallery, Washington, D.C., also 1944. 1943: Paul Rosenberg & Co., N.Y., also 1944, 1945, 1946. 1944: The Arts Club of Chicago; Bertha Schaefer Gallery, N.Y. 1945: Durand-Ruel Gallery, N.Y., also 1946, 1947, 1949. 1946: Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center. 1947: Portland (Oregon) Museum. 1950: Laurel Gallery, N.Y. 1950: Knoedler Gallery, N.Y. 1951: Grace Borgenicht Gallery, N.Y., also 1952, 1954, 1956, 1957, 1958, 1959. 1952: Baltimore Museum of Art, also Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; Lowe Gallery, Coral Gables, Florida; Phillips Gallery, Washington, D.C.; Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford. 1956: Mills College, California; Houston Museum of Fine Arts; Santa Barbara Museum of Art; Felix Landau Gallery, Los Angeles, also 1959; University of Nebraska. 1956: HCE Gallery, Provincetown, Massachusetts, also 1958, 1959. 1958: Otto Seligman Gallery, Seattle. 1959: Art Alliance, Philadelphia. 1960: Retrospective Exhibition circulated by The American Federation of Arts, opening in New York City at The Whitney Museum of American Art.

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**Abbreviations:** Ag August, Am American, Ap April, D December, ed edited, F February, il illustration (s), Ja January, Je June, Jl July, Mr March, My May, N November, O October, p page(s), Pl plate, por portrait, S September.

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Phillips Exeter Academy; Smith College Museum of Art; Tel Aviv Museum; University of Illinois; University Gallery, University of Minnesota; Walker Art Center; Whitney Museum of American Art; Witte Memorial Museum; Yale University Art Gallery.

### **CATALOG / PAINTINGS:**

*All works in the exhibition are illustrated. Dimensions are in inches. Height precedes width.*

- 1 RIDERS IN THE PARK, 1930 Oil on paper board, 48 × 72½ *Lent by the artist*
- 2 WOMAN WITH GREEN FACE, (MY WIFE), 1932 Oil on canvas, 23½ × 24  
*Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Bernard Livingston*
- 3 THE CIRCUS, 1933 Oil on paper board, 48 × 72 *Lent by the artist*
- 4 BURLESQUE, 1936 Oil on canvas, 36 × 28 *Lent by the artist*
- 5 BROOK BATHERS, 1938 Oil on canvas, 30 × 40 *Lent by Makler Gallery, Philadelphia*
- 6 GASpé-PINK SKY, 1940 Oil on canvas, 32 × 44 *Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Maurice Geller*
- 7 BROWN HAT, 1941 Oil on canvas, 36 × 28 *Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Edward F. Kook*
- 8 PORTRAIT OF ELSHEMIUS, 1942 Oil on canvas, 36¾ × 28  
*Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Louis Kaufman*
- 9 CONVERSATION IN STUDIO, 1943 Oil on canvas, 42 × 36  
*Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger*
- 10 THE PINK COCK, 1943 Oil on canvas, 36 × 48 *Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Earle Ludgin*

11 CELLO PLAYER, 1944 Oil on canvas,  $52 \times 34$  Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Maurice Geller

12 MOTHER AND CHILD, 1944 Oil on canvas,  $39\frac{3}{4} \times 29\frac{3}{4}$  Lent by Mrs. Tirca Karlis

13 PINK TABLE CLOTH, 1944 Oil on canvas,  $32\frac{1}{8} \times 48\frac{1}{8}$   
*Lent by the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger*

14 SWIMMERS AND SUNBATHERS, 1945 Oil on canvas,  $27\frac{3}{4} \times 48\frac{1}{4}$   
*Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger, 1951*

15 ROOSTER'S DOMAIN, 1948 Oil on canvas,  $30 \times 40$   
*Lent by Mr. and Mrs. Roy R. Neuberger*

16 CLEAR CUT LANDSCAPE, 1951 Oil on canvas,  $32 \times 42$   
*Lent by The San Francisco Museum of Art*

17 BREAKING SEA, 1952 Oil on canvas,  $30 \times 40$  Lent by The Baltimore Museum of Art

18 SHEEP, 1952 Oil on canvas,  $30 \times 40$  Lent by the artist

19 SUNSET, 1952 Oil on canvas,  $42 \times 48$  Lent by The Brooklyn Museum

20 ADVANCING SEA, 1953 Oil on canvas,  $41\frac{1}{8} \times 48\frac{1}{16}$  Lent by the artist

21 BICYCLE RIDER BY THE LOIRE, 1954 Oil on canvas,  $38 \times 55$  Lent by the artist

22 MARCH IN BROWN, 1954 Oil on canvas,  $44 \times 32$   
*Lent by the Grace Borgenicht Gallery, Inc.*

23 MORNING SEA, 1955 Oil on canvas,  $38 \times 56$  Lent by the artist

24 UPPER PASTURE, 1955 Oil on canvas, 40 × 52 *Lent by the artist*

25 YELLOW MEADOW, 1955 Oil on canvas, 42 × 60  
*Lent by the Grace Borgenicht Gallery, Inc.*

26 WHITE MOON, 1957 Oil on canvas, 50 × 38  
*Lent by the Grace Borgenicht Gallery, Inc.*

27 YELLOW JACKET, 1957 Oil on canvas, 40 × 56 *Lent by Mr. Fred Olsen*

28 DARK FOREST, 1958 Oil on canvas, 40 × 53 *Lent by the artist*

29 RED SUN, 1958 Oil on canvas, 26 × 42 *Lent by Mr. Fred Olsen*

30 REFLECTIONS, 1958 Oil on canvas, 50 × 72 *Lent by the artist*

31 SEA AND DUNES, 1958 Oil on canvas, 54 × 72  
*Lent by the Grace Borgenicht Gallery, Inc.*

32 SUNSET ON A QUIET SEA, 1958 Oil on canvas, 48 × 72 *Lent by the artist*

33 YELLOW SKY, 1958 Oil on canvas, 60 × 72 *Lent by the artist*

34 SAND, SEA AND SKY, 1959 Oil on canvas, 60 × 72  
*Lent by Collection Lariviere, Montreal, Canada*

35 TANGERINE MOON AND WINE DARK SEA, 1959 Oil on canvas, 60 × 72  
*Lent by the artist*

1 RIDERS IN THE PARK, 1930



2 WOMAN WITH GREEN FACE,  
(MY WIFE), 1932



3 THE CIRCUS, 1933



4 BURLESQUE, 1936

5 BROOK BATHERS, 1938



6 GASPÉ-PINK SKY, 1940

7 BROWN HAT, 1941



9 CONVERSATION IN STUDIO, 1943



8 PORTRAIT OF ELSHEMIUS, 1942

10 THE PINK COCK, 1945



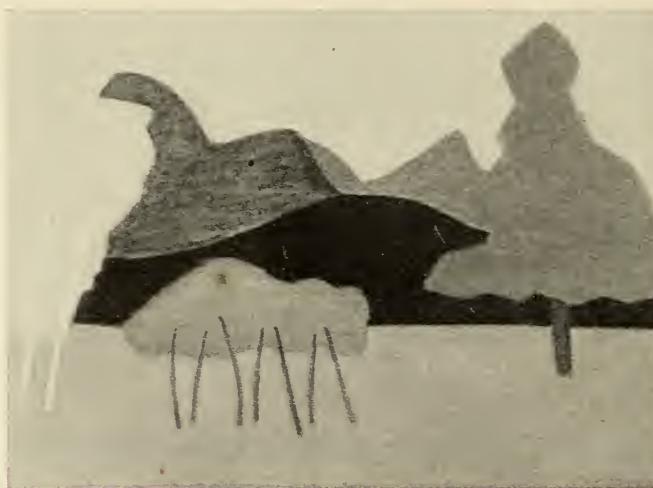
11 CELLO PLAYER, 1944

13 PINK TABLE CLOTH, 1944



14 SWIMMERS AND SUNBATHERS, 1945

15 ROOSTER'S DOMAIN, 1948



16 CLEAR CUT LANDSCAPE, 1951

17 BREAKING SEA, 1952



18 SHEEP, 1952

19 SUNSET, 1952



20 ADVANCING SEA, 1955



21 BICYCLE RIDER BY THE LOIRE, 1954



22 MARCH IN BROWN, 1954



25 MORNING SEA, 1955



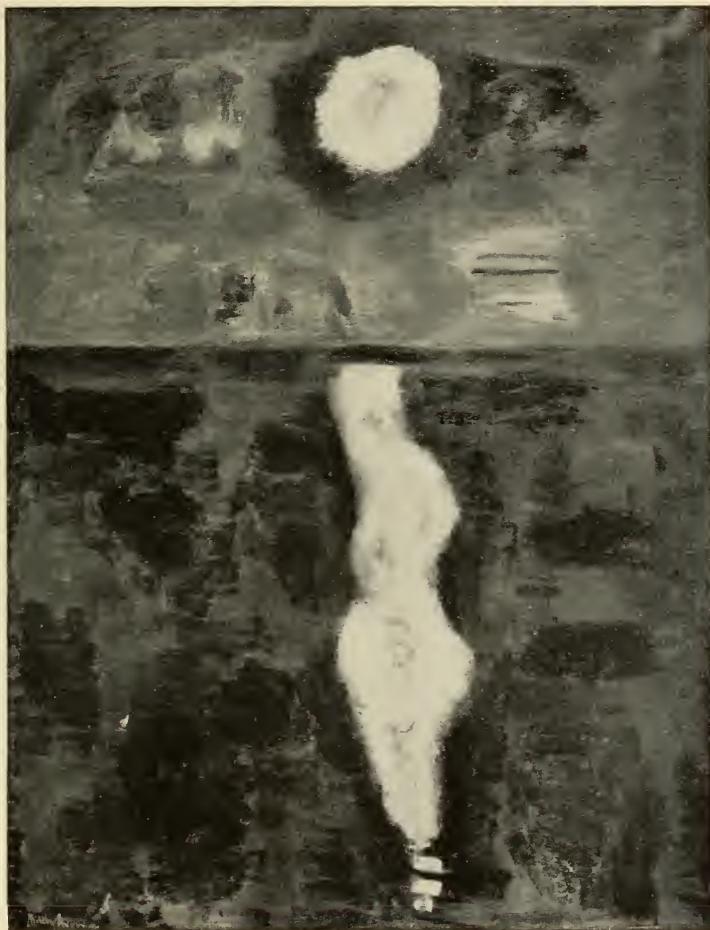
24 UPPER PASTURE, 1955



25 YELLOW MEADOW, 1955



26 WHITE MOON, 1957



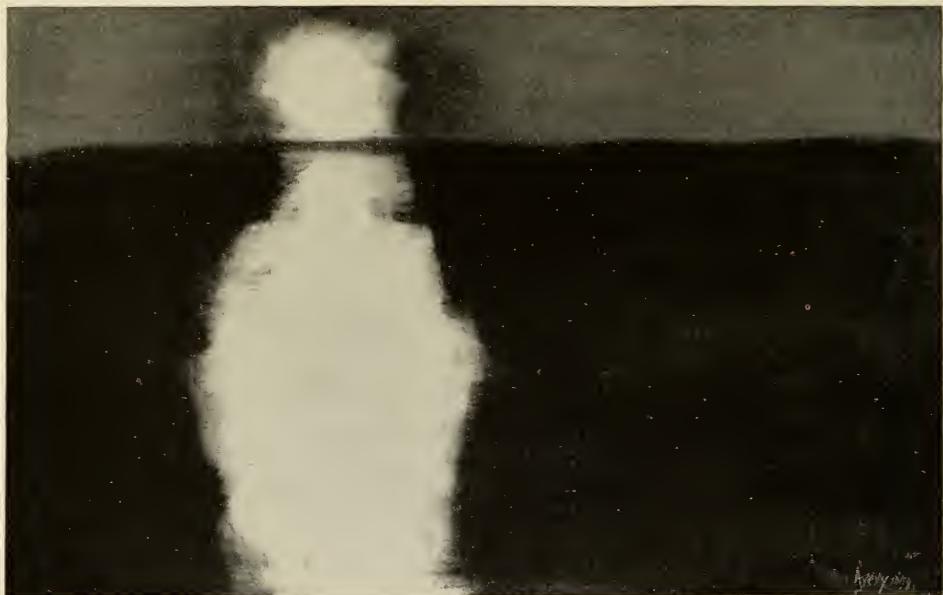
27 YELLOW JACKET, 1957



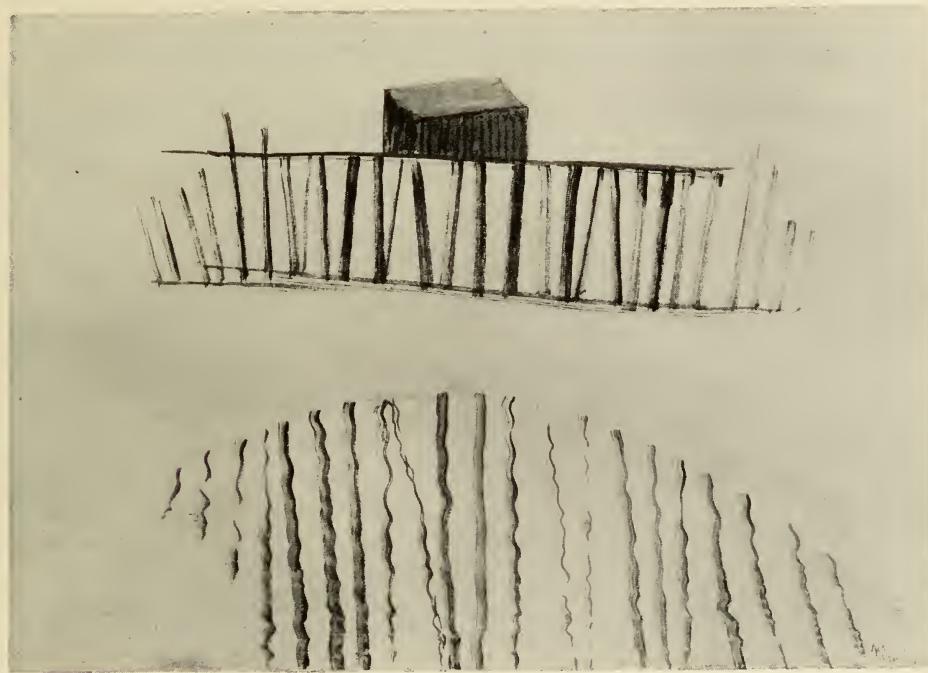
28 DARK FOREST, 1958



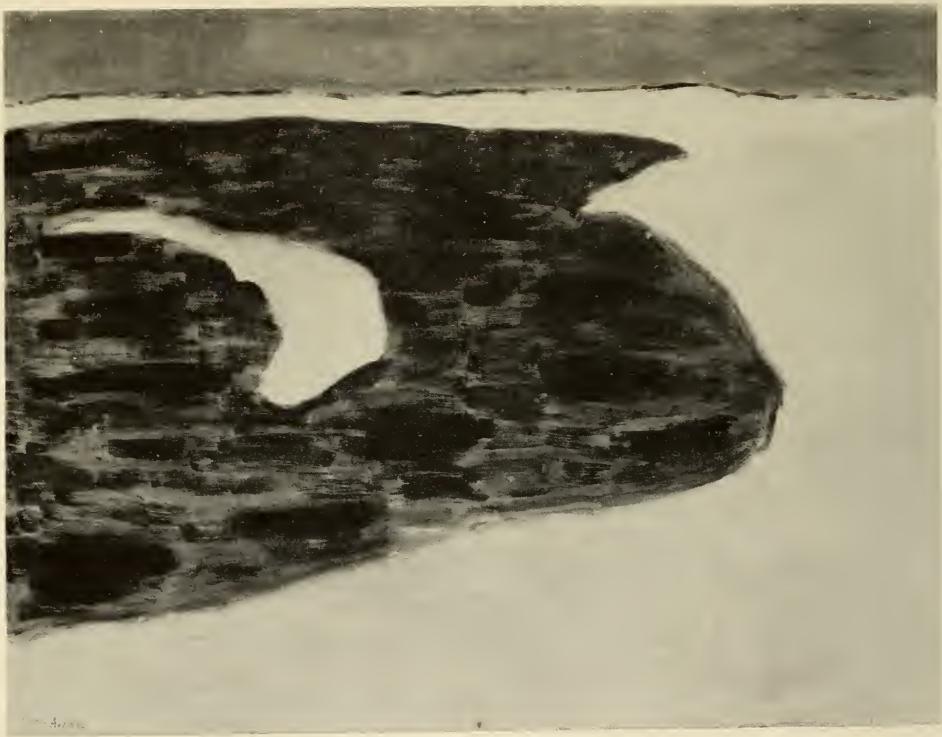
29 RED SUN, 1958



30 REFLECTIONS, 1958



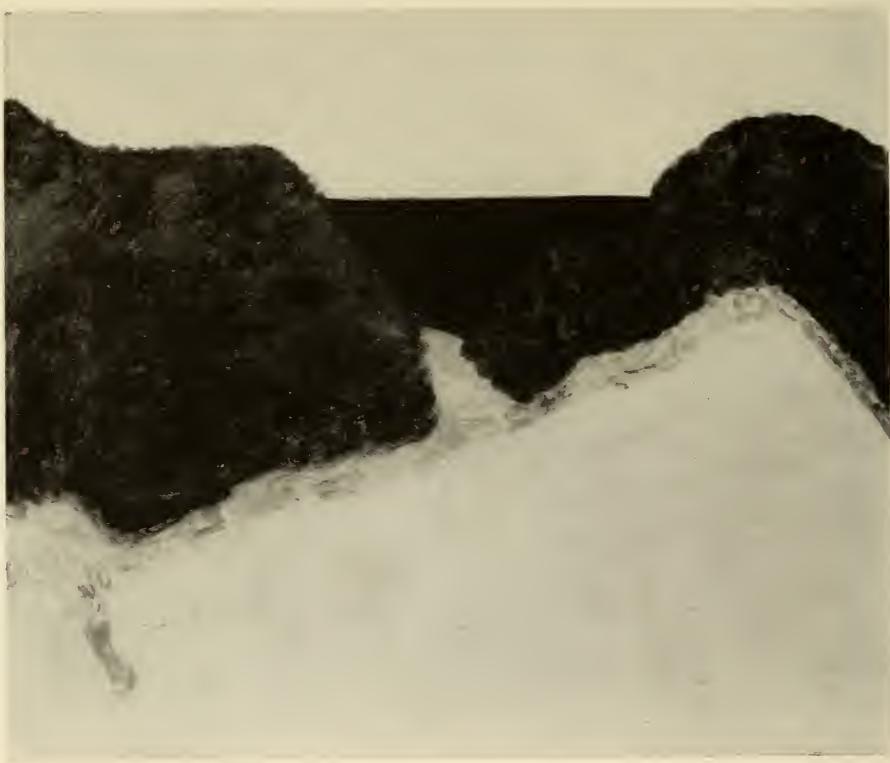
54 SEA AND DUNES, 1958



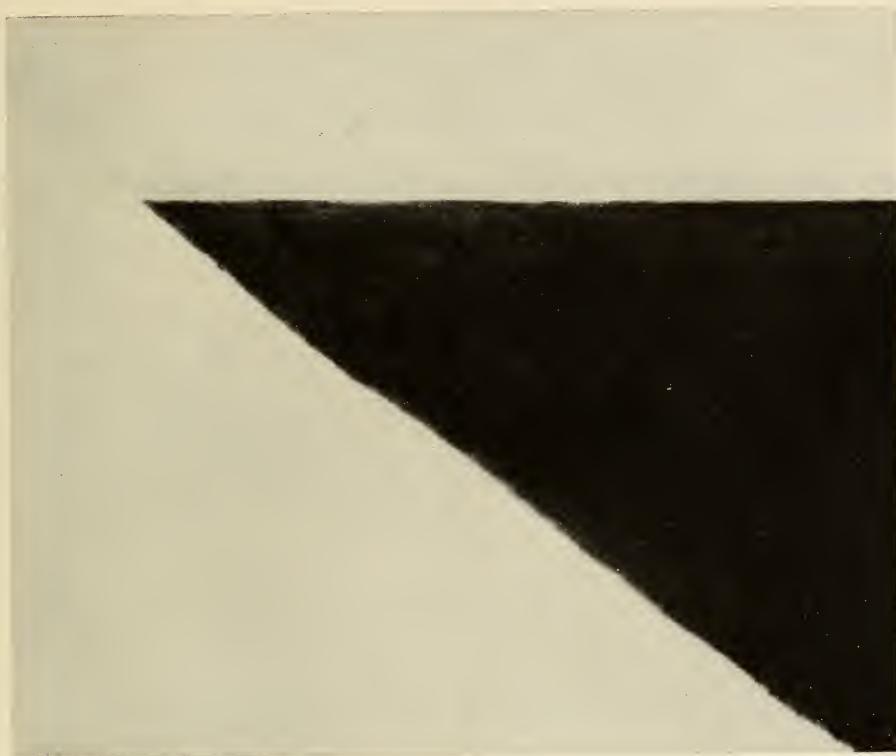
52 SUNSET ON A QUIET SEA, 1958



53 YELLOW SKY, 1958



34 SAND, SEA AND SKY, 1959



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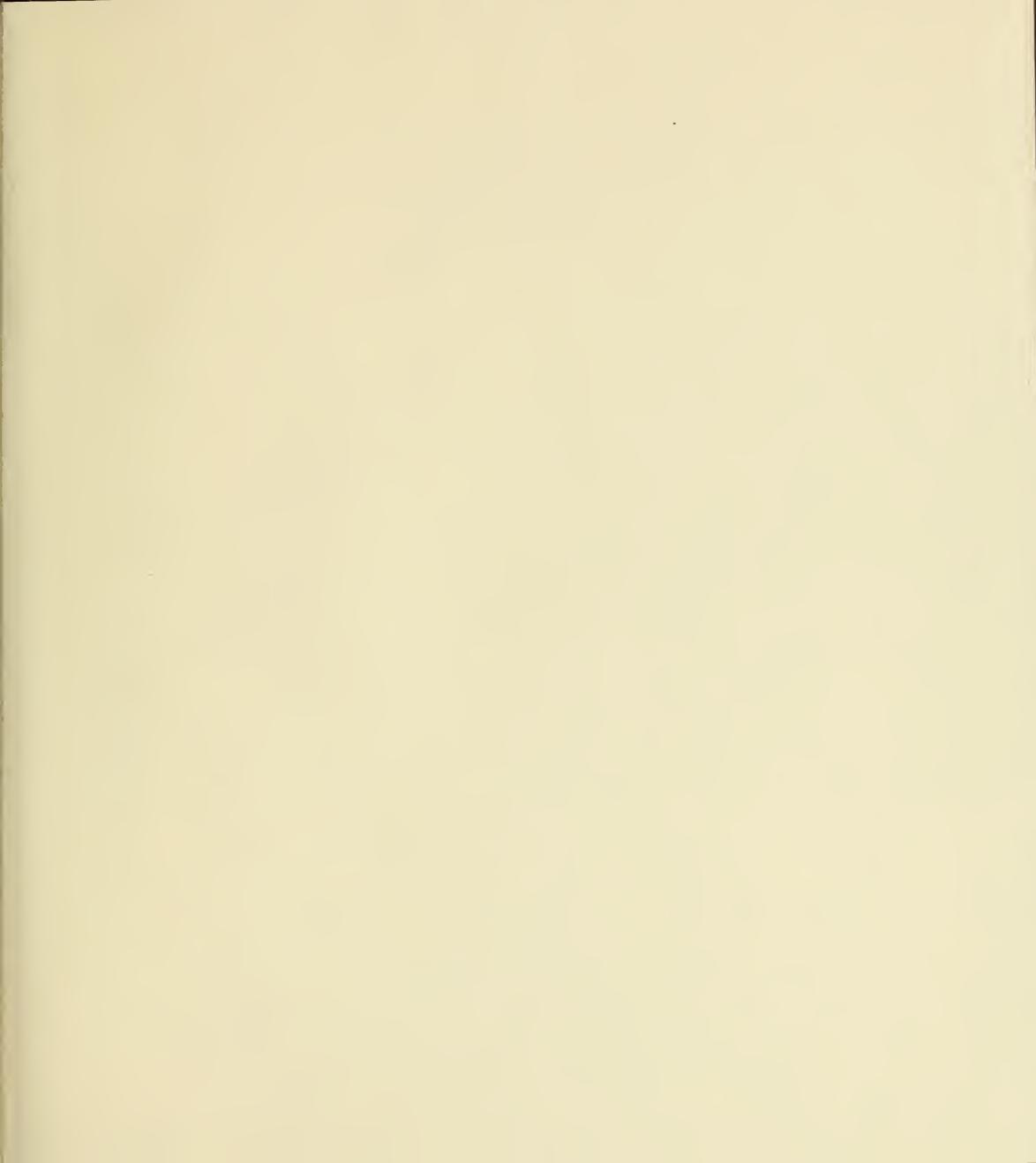
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